

Welcome to Hawkins! by Tea_For_One_Please

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Summary:

When the filthy-rich Wheeler family lose everything and are evicted from their Hollywood home, they have no choice but to move to the small, unassuming town of Hawkins, Indiana - the only asset the family was allowed to retain.

A mother who has only ever known a life of financial ease, now learning to live with nothing; an eldest sister who's always bounced from one relationship to another, now living single and discovering who she is when she's alone; a son who was once surrounded by false friends, now accepting the loneliness of his existence and forming meaningful relationships for the first time; and a youngest daughter who grew up spoiled and isolated; now placed into a real school, among real people.

Most importantly of all, a family united only by their shared disaster, forced to live alongside each other in this ridiculous little town, so far removed from the life they've always known.

1. Welcome to Hanks

Author's Note:

This can sort of be considered a 'Schitt's Creek' AU - but only in that the premise of the two stories is the same. There aren't many direct parallels, the narrative flows very differently after the initial setup, and you don't need to have watched that show to understand the story.

Anyway, enjoy!

An eastern breeze pushes a dark cloud over the Los Angeles sky, blotting out the evening sun as it sinks lower over the Pacific. All along the beach, disgruntled vacationers retreat out of the water and trudge up the sand towards the shore, and across the city, businesses hastily bring in their signs, stalls and tables as the locals brace themselves for a storm.

Undeterred, a fleet of sleek black cars file up the winding roads which connect the hillside mansions overlooking the city, stopping at a wrought iron gate. The driver's window of the lead car rolls smoothly down, and a man in a navy-blue windbreaker leans out.

"Please state your business," says a voice from the metal grille set into the high stone wall.

"Inland Revenue," says the man, and the gate immediately starts to open.

The cars stop outside the columned porch, and one side of a set of double doors opens, revealing an elderly maid, her face fixed with an expression of concern as she notes the big white letters *IRS* emblazoned on his jacket. "Can I help you?" she says nervously.

"My name is Agent Manilow, I need to speak with Mrs Wheeler," the man says.

"The family is at dinner," the maid replies.

“Not for long,” Manilow says drily, pushing past the maid onto the shining white marble floor. “Which way to the dining room?” The maid, too frightened to resist, points to his left. “Thank you.”

He marches straight through the drawing room and into the adjoining room, where four people are seated around a grand dining table in silence, the room doused in yellow light by the crystal chandelier hanging from the high ceiling. At the head of the table, an elegant woman in her early fifties stands up angrily upon his arrival, and Agent Manilow takes in the scene.

The other three occupants comprise a young woman and a young man, apparently in their early twenties, and a younger girl, who can’t be more than eleven. *These must be the Wheeler children*, he thinks; were it not for his unshakeable professionalism, he would laugh at the matching looks of indignation that the family is offering him.

“Who are you?” asks the woman at the head of the table in a sharp voice, but her eyes widen when she notices his windbreaker.

“Please take a seat, Mrs Wheeler.”

She lowers herself back into her chair, and her outrage has turned to suspicious concern. “What is this?”

“Mrs Wheeler, do you know where your husband is?”

“Of course,” she says, bewildered. “He’s in New York, on business.”

“Incorrect,” says Manilow, scribbling something in his notebook, and her ire returns.

“Would you kindly explain what is going on?”

“Mrs Wheeler, your husband recently made an investment, is that correct?”

“I believe so, but he handles the finances, so I don’t know much about it. Something in... marketing, wasn’t it?”

“It was,” Agent Manilow says pointedly.

“What do you mean, *was*?” asks the young man in a low voice, speaking for the first time.

“The company has failed. The choice of investment was an appalling one.”

“So what does that mean?” asks the young woman.

“It means your money is gone.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Mrs Wheeler snaps. “Ted wouldn’t have invented *all* our money in one company. He wouldn’t.” Manilow says nothing, and a hand flies to her mouth. “He *didn’t*.”

“And then some,” he says quietly. “It appears that he retained something in the region of 100,000 dollars in one savings account, but that account was emptied last night in the bank’s Jacksonville branch, and he hasn’t been seen since.”

A soft, hysterical, laugh escapes her lips. “You’re not serious.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“He’s run off with everything?”

“We’re trying to locate him, but since he’s using cash, he’s harder to track. We think he’s managed to get out of the country.”

“What does this mean?” demands the young woman.

“It means we have to requisition his assets to cover your debts,” says Manilow, sounding apologetic for the first time. “Including this house. I’m afraid I have to ask you all to leave.”

An hour later, the four Wheelers are gathered in the dark on a stone bench on the front driveway, with a small pile of suitcases stacked beside them. Having spent the last hour on the phone, calling everyone they could think of, the two eldest of the Wheeler children, Nancy and Mike, are arguing in hushed voices. The youngest, Holly, has said nothing since the announcement, and is stubbornly running

a brush through her doll's curls. Their mother, Karen, sits on the bench, staring blankly into space, utterly in shock.

"We're ruined," she murmurs to no one in particular, twisting her handkerchief between her hands and vaguely imagining that it's her husband's neck. "We've got nowhere to go."

"Beg pardon, ma'am," says a younger-looking agent, approaching them with a clipboard, "but there *is* somewhere."

"Kids! Listen to this!" Karen snaps, and they both look over, annoyed at the interruption. "Yes?"

"Among the listed assets is a town in Indiana," says the agent, and she examines her notes. "It's called... Hawkins?"

"Yes, my husband bought it years ago," Karen says impatiently. "Wasn't it repossessed with everything else?"

"No, ma'am. The executives at the Service decided it wasn't worth the time or the effort."

"Well, *that's* encouraging," Mike says, rolling his eyes and returning to his phone call.

"We've made contact with the town's authorities," the agent goes on, "and they've agreed to put you up for free."

"There must be another option," Nancy says desperately, and the agent arches an eyebrow.

"Sure. There's the street outside the front gate."

"We shall go to this... Hawkins place," says his mother briskly, standing up and brushing off her skirt. "Would you be so kind as to arrange a jet?" The agent doesn't answer, but glances at the road, where their suitcases are being loaded into the luggage compartment of a bus. Karen sighs, and takes Holly's hand. Clearly this day couldn't get any worse.

Mike fidgets uncomfortably in his seat, feeling utterly wretched.

Thirty-three hours on a bus is enough to make anyone miserable, but not only that, he's been forced to pack his entire existence into a couple of suitcases and thrown out into the night. As if that wasn't enough, not one of his friends in New York is able to put him up for even a few weeks until he finds his feet again. How very *convenient*.

The sun's just risen, although he can hardly tell for the dull grey clouds covering the sky in every direction. The dusty interior of the bus is bathed in milky twilight, and Mike groans as they pass an ancient wooden sign, reading *W lco e to Ha k ns!* in chipped white paint.

"Mom, I'm bored," Holly complains, and Mike grinds his teeth. She's been complaining thus every forty-five minutes since they left, and it was annoying before they even crossed the California border.

"Holly, please," his mother says, "I'm trying to work out where we're going."

Mike snorts at this notion. Based on what? It's like they've stepped back in time. There is, quite literally, nothing to see. That broken-down sign was the first landmark they've passed in hours, and everything else, as far as the eye can see, is fields. Oh, and some sort of barn set into a patch of trees. Thrilling.

Mike glances briefly at his phone, double-checking that his notifications are, in fact, turned on, and he sighs. In nearly two days, he hasn't received a single phone call, text... nothing, not even just to check that he's okay. He wouldn't admit that he's not okay even if someone did contact him, but that isn't the point.

He isn't sure what prompts the memory, but a vivid scene flashes across his mind of the night he and his friends discovered that one of their group had lost all their money gambling. "How stupid!" they all crowed, vowing that they would never be so careless – but Mike failed to consider that everything he thought he owned was tied up in his parents' fortune.

He leans forward, desperate to change his position, and rests his chin

on the seat in front of him. At long last, they seem to be approaching the town. The bus slows down and turns off the road, stopping gently in front of a boxy, two-story building adorned in cracked off-white paint. The sign on the wall, reads *MOTEL*, and the 'L' lists slightly to the right. In an unusual demonstration of solidarity, Mike turns to Nancy in dismay, and she catches his eye, shaking her head minutely.

"Mom?" he calls fearfully, but she's already marching out of the bus, where the driver is already unloading their minimal luggage. Mike, Nancy and Holly follow her out.

"...a mistake, or something!"

"No, ma'am, this is the address I was given," the driver says meekly.

"I was expecting a house, or... a hotel, or something," she replies furiously.

The driver shrugs. "I just drive the bus."

"Call them."

"Call... who, ma'am?"

"Well, who gave you the address?"

"The lady from the IRS," he says, looking bemused, and Karen pinches the bridge of her nose.

"This can't be where we're staying," Nancy whispers.

"Looks like it," Mike says bluntly, picking up his and Holly's suitcases. "Come on."

"Out of my way," his mother says impatiently, dragging her own case along behind her and marching into the lobby, where a young woman is standing at a coffee machine.

He studies her as his mother marches to the reception desk and slams her hand down on the service bell. She seems to be about their age: she's much shorter than him, and her brown hair hangs down as far as her shoulders. Her flannel is about three sizes too big for her,

which isn't a good look, in Mike's opinion, but her dark eyes are bright and curious as she surveys them in return.

She crosses silently from the coffee machine to the desk, and sits down in the chair behind it. "May I help you?"

"My name is Karen Wheeler," his mother says briskly. "I'm very much hoping we're not expected."

"Oh, *you're*..." Her eyes widen with interest, and she taps something into her computer. "You definitely are," she says, and Mike hears Nancy curse under her breath. "Yes, you're booked into Rooms Nine and Ten, comped by the local council." She smiles cordially, and Karen shakes her head.

"We'll need four rooms, or three at the absolute least."

"I'm very sorry," the young woman says patiently. "But this is already stretching our one-room policy, so there's really no way I can – "

"Well, if you're already breaking protocol, why can't you break it a bit more?" Mike demands, and if Mike didn't know better, he'd say she looks amused.

"Listen," his mother says with an exasperated sigh. "We haven't slept in nearly two days. We're tired. We're dirty. We've just travelled two thousand miles *by bus*, and you're telling me you can't give us even one extra room?"

"That is correct, I cannot."

Karen tightens her grip on the edge of the desk and closes her eyes. "Please go and fetch the manager."

The young woman blinks. "The manager?"

"That's what I said. I'm sure we can come to an arrangement."

"Right," she says slowly, and Mike is now certain that she's trying not to laugh. "Sure, I'll go and fetch the... manager. One moment, please." She wanders into the room behind the desk, and returns a few moments later. "Good morning," she says pleasantly. "My name's

El, I'm the general manager. Is there something I can help you with?"

Okay, she's funny. Mike's willing to concede that much.

Without waiting for a response, El turns around and removes two keys from the row of hooks on the wall. "Rooms Nine and Ten," she says calmly, holding them out over the desk. "I hope you enjoy your stay with us, Mrs Wheeler."

Relax, Nancy thinks to herself, *it can't be as bad as it looks*. She's travelled enough to have seen her fair share of second-rate hotels, and this is classic – sure, it doesn't look much on the outside, but that's because their efforts are on maintaining the rooms. She's picturing a spacious, airy room with a couple of twin beds, maybe a little couch and coffee table, and a small closet each. The bathroom will be shared, of course, and Nancy grimaces at the thought of having to use the shower after Mike, but all in all, she doesn't share her mother's clear opinion that they're stepping through the gates of hell.

The key turns in the lock, and she promptly changes her mind.

There are two twin beds – on this score, she was right. But this is far from the bright, clean room she was hoping for. For one thing, it's half the size she imagined. For another, the floor is *tiled*, with a couple of grubby rugs placed here and there across the floor. A single closet stands in the corner of the room, and the bedding looks about as old as she is.

"Move," Mike says savagely from behind her, shoving past her with his suitcase and throwing it down on one of the beds.

Her phone emits a muffled chime from inside her purse, and as she pulls it out, Nancy decides she doesn't care about the room anymore.

"I think it's cute," she announces, and Mike looks at her as if she's deranged.

"Cute?" he repeats, and looks around. "Are we... looking at the same room? What about this is *cute*?"

"It's, you know, quaint," she says cheerfully. "It'll be perfect for you."

Mike narrows his eyes. "What happened? What do you know?"

"Nothing," Nancy says, adopting an innocent expression. "Only that Steve's coming to get me. He can be here in, like, two hours, if he comes by helicopter." Okay, he hasn't actually *said* this, but he's replied to her message explaining the situation, so it's only a matter of time.

"Are you serious?" he demands, his eyes widening in furious disbelief. "Why can't he take the rest of us?"

"Oh, my god, Mike, calm down, it's not some big conspiracy," she tuts. "It's just that they've had to downsize too, so he has a two-seater helicopter."

"So you're abandoning us," he says angrily, "to swan off with your boyfriend of six months?"

"Actually, we're celebrating our twenty-five-week anniversary next week," Nancy says, folding her arms across her chest defensively, "and I'm pretty sure he's going to propose."

"What, when he arrives?"

"No, like, at some point."

"Oh, my god," he murmurs, sinking onto the bed for a moment, but he jumps back up again like he's been stung. "This is *not* clean."

"I'm sure you're just being dramatic," she says, smiling at her phone as she types back a reply. "Just sent him the address."

Mike doesn't reply, but stalks into the bathroom, and immediately steps out again. "Have you seen this?" Actually, she forgot to look at the bathroom, having been distracted by Steve's message.

She peers in and wrinkles her nose. "You poor thing. I'm sure you'll be fine."

"You certainly will be, sunning yourself back in LA."

“Actually, he said our next trip would be to Miami, so there.”

Suddenly, the adjoining door opens, and their mother appears in the frame. “We need another bed,” she says, her voice sounding hollow. “There’s only a queen in here, so there’s nowhere for Holly to sleep.”

“Well, that actually doesn’t matter,” Mike says coldly, “because Nancy’s leaving us.”

“What?” their mother says, looking at Nancy with a stricken expression. She hits *send* on the message she’s been typing and rolls her eyes.

“Ugh, okay, I admit that have an exit route, but I’m not about to apologise for that.”

“Alright,” her mother says, clearly too tired to argue. “Holly, you can have this other bed. Let’s unpack what little we have, then we’ll go find some food.”

“This place has a restaurant?” Mike says, perking up.

“Doubt it,” Nancy says smugly.

“It has a microwave,” Holly pipes up.

Nancy sees her mother press her fingers to her temples, before wandering back into the other room. Not keen to use either of the frail-looking chairs positioned at the tiny table, Nancy sits down on her suitcase, tapping out a second message to Steve, who hasn’t replied to the last one she sent a minute ago. She’s just opened Instagram to see if there are any messages there, when she hears someone knock on the exterior door.

“Mike, get that,” she says without looking up. “It’s probably the receptionist.”

“Manager,” he says, quietly enough that their mother doesn’t hear, and Nancy smirks. It’s not El, though, and Nancy glances at the door as it opens. A tall, stocky, unshaven man is standing outside, dressed

in blue jeans and a dark-coloured flannel shirt.

“Morning,” he says in a gruff voice.

“I’m sorry,” Mike says hastily, “we don’t have anything we can give you.”

The man says nothing in response to this, but raises a bushy eyebrow. “Is your mother in?”

“She won’t give you anything either,” Mike’s saying, but Nancy’s already crossed to the adjoining door.

“Mom,” she says, “there’s a hobo at the door.”

“Hardly surprising,” she tuts, and shunts Mike out of the way, positioning herself between the man and Holly. “We don’t have anything for you. Please go away and stop bothering us.”

Nancy hears approaching footsteps, and El appears presently, waiting at the man’s elbow. “Is everything okay?”

“Excuse me,” Karen says, and Nancy’s willing to bet that she’s forgotten her name. “This man won’t leave. We think he wants money.”

El’s eyes, unbelievably, widen further, and she clears her throat, addressing the tall man quietly. “Do you want to tell them, or shall I?”

He looks at each of them in turn and smirks. “I’ll do it.” He holds out a hand to Karen, who shakes it doubtfully. “Jim Hopper, Chief of Hawkins Police and head of the town council. I got the call from the agent at your end and secured you the rooms.”

“You’re... you...” Karen stammers, and Nancy bites her lip in embarrassment, but her mother doesn’t back down.

“My father,” El adds awkwardly, which is just too much, and Nancy cringes. *Boy*, is this a day for misplaced assumptions.

“Anyway,” Hopper says briskly, “I just wanted to drop by and

welcome you to Hawkins. I guess I'll, uh, go away and stop bothering you."

"Why aren't you in uniform?" Karen demands, and he turns back towards her.

"It's 6:30 in the morning, ma'am, and my shift doesn't start until 8:00."

"Well, an officer of the law should present himself better," she says firmly, and his moustache twitches.

"Duly noted. I wish you a good day." He squeezes El's shoulder as he wanders off.

"I wanted to check that you have everything you need," El says, and Nancy steps up before Mike can make a sarcastic comment.

"I think we're good, thank you so much."

"Okay," El says with a shrug. "I'll be in the lobby if you need me."

As she closes the door, she can't help thinking that she's very relieved that she doesn't have to stay. In the fifteen minutes since their arrival, her mother and brother have already insulted two people, both of whom have significant influence over their time here, in different ways, and who also happen to be related.

Also, it's disgusting, and she would rather be literally anywhere else in the world, with the man of her dreams, whom she very much likes. Her phone chimes again, but as she reads the message, her chest closes and her blood runs cold.

"What the *fuck*?" Holly's eyes widen, but Nancy doesn't care, and reads the message aloud. "'Sorry Nance, don't think I can deal with your situation right now, I think we should see other people?'" She turns to Mike in bewilderment. "What do you think he means?"

"I'm not sure," Mike says. He's finally got over himself and is lying on the bed, and he taps his own phone against his chin, pretending to

think about her question. "I'd *imagine* it means he's not coming to get you. And he's definitely not proposing 'at some point'." She lets out a high growl of frustration and collapses onto the second bed.

"That's my bed!" Holly protests, and Nancy tips her suitcase onto the floor.

"Go next door. You'll have to share with Mom."

"This is so *unfair!*" she shouts, but stamps into the other room all the same.

"I just can't believe he would do this to me," Nancy says, neither knowing nor caring if Mike is listening.

"I know," he says, rolling onto his side and adopting a face of mock sympathy. "You were together for nearly *twenty-five weeks*."

"Do you care at all?" she snaps.

"Do you?" he snipes back. "You only wanted him to come so you could leave. Besides, I *hated* Steve."

"Steve's an awesome guy, actually, you just never – "

"Out of interest," Mike interrupts, "do you still think this place is 'cute', or..?"

"You're such an *asshole*, Mike!"

He storms out and makes a beeline for the rotary clothesline, sunken in a patch of grass fifty yards away. Hanging from it is a small cloth bag with some cheap plastic pegs, and Mike starts clipping the towels and face-cloth to the line, cursing his selfish father and his endless money-making schemes.

"What are you doing?" says a voice, making him jump. He turns around to see El, pushing a cleaning cart.

"I'm airing these," he says matter-of-factly. "They don't smell clean."

"Hanging them there won't help you today," she says, leaning on her cart and smirking.

"And why's that?" El points to a cardboard lawn windmill secured clumsily to the border fence, and Mike sees the blades spinning wildly. A stray leaf smacks him on the face, and he lets out a small shriek. "I thought they would air better in the wind," he says, confused.

"Sure! Except we're downwind of a pig farm," she says, and his mouth opens slightly in horror. "It's not too bad yet, but when they let them out into the pasture, we're in for it."

"Oh, my god, I'm literally in hell," he murmurs, and she laughs.

"You'll get used to it. By the way, there's a fireside party happening at one of the farms tonight. Do you want to come?"

"What's a fireside party?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. I'm assuming you don't have any plans?"

"I do, actually."

"You do?" she says, clearly surprised.

"Yeah, I'm going to go and buy a toaster, and treat myself to a long bath."

She grins again. "You're funny. What did you say your name was?"

"Mike. If your name is El, why does your name badge say 'Jane'?"

"Oh, I have to wear a name badge. So that people know who I am," she says, nodding as if this, in any way, clears things up.

"Yes, but why does it say 'Jane'?"

"It was the only one we had," she shrugs. "And like I say, people need to know who I am."

“But that doesn’t help them – ”

“I’m leaving here at six-thirty if you change your mind about the party,” she says, and suddenly he hears Nancy’s voice.

“Did someone say ‘party’?” Honestly, she’s like a shark to blood.

“Oh, yeah,” El says casually. “Up at one of the farms.”

“I’m, like, already there.”

“Mm, you’re not, though,” says Mike, matching her tone, and she smiles icily at him.

“I’m leaving here at six-thirty,” El says, giving them both a strange look. “I’ll see you later.” She kicks the brake off her cart and pushes it quickly away.

Nancy wrinkles her nose. “What’s that smell?”

“Must be you. No one noticed it ‘til you did,” Mike shoots back, but he can hear the distant echoes of porcine grunts and squeals, and quickly heads back indoors. The pigs are out to pasture.

The sight of Holly on her phone and his mother sitting at the little table, staring blankly into space, is a depressing one, and Mike decides someone needs to finally take charge of the situation. Although his father was never the leading type, people seemed to rally around him automatically. Mike’s pretty sure he can have the same effect, with a bit of effort. After all, he’s the ‘man of the house’ now, as it were – he can’t just sit around doing nothing.

“Come on,” he says briskly. “We’re going to find somewhere to eat.”

“I’m not hungry,” his mother says vacantly, not averting her eyes from the middle distance.

“It’s been two days since our last good meal, I seriously doubt that.” Perhaps the conviction in his tone worked, because she suddenly looks up and nods numbly, before standing up and pulling on her

coat. “Holly,” he says firmly, whipping her phone out of her hand and ignoring her protests.

“Where are we going?” she demands.

“I don’t know,” he says, wavering only slightly, “but it’s unreasonable to think that everyone in this shithole cooks for themselves *all* the time, so there must be some kind of a restaurant.” He breathes out in a satisfied way, content with this sound logic. Nancy hums in agreement, and it occurs to Mike that she’s in a remarkably good mood for someone whose boyfriend dumped her less than half an hour ago, so either she’s already gone through every stage of grief and arrived at ‘acceptance’, or she’s still stuck at ‘denial’.

Truthfully, he’s pretty sure that’s where he’s at. A small, naïve part of him is still convinced that at any second, he’ll wake up to the sound of the rain drumming gently of the skylight of his New York apartment, and that he’ll go to brunch with a friend and laugh about a stupid dream he had last night. However, with every step he takes into the town, he starts to realise that no part of even his twisted subconscious could conjure this.

The only word that comes to mind is ‘bleak’. At this early hour, everything seems lifeless. Several shop windows are boarded up, and of the ones that aren’t, most haven’t opened for the day. One person passes them, and smiles warmly, but they’re too fixated on taking in these depressing surroundings. Across the square, the town hall clock chimes the quarter-hour, and Mike half-expects to see a rogue tumbleweed bouncing down the road.

They stop outside one of the few establishments that’s already open for business; it’s a small building with a faded neon sign outside which reads ‘Benny’s’. Mike peers through the grubby windows and sees tables set out inside, with people eating at them.

“I think this is our best bet,” he says with enough decisiveness for all four of them, and feeling somewhat uplifted by the prospect of food, he marches in.

If she’s being rational, Karen has to admit that it could be worse; the

café's big windows let in a lot of light; the music playing over the speaker system is agreeable, if a little outdated; and it's certainly cleaner than the motel. Nevertheless, this is still the crummiest establishment in which she has ever stepped foot, and she forces herself not to turn up her nose as Mike approaches the counter.

"Table for four," he says firmly. The young woman wiping it down with a frayed cloth appears to be about Nancy's age, and she looks at her son with bemusement.

"I'm sorry?"

"We'd like a table for four," Mike repeats, only this time, he sounds a little testy. "I thought that was clear."

"Okay," she says, and one side of her mouth twitches upwards, and gestures to the numerous unoccupied tables and booths. "Take your pick."

"Table or booth?" Mike asks quietly, glaring at the waitress.

"Table," says Nancy, curling her lip as she examines the booths.

"Booth," Karen says instead, and all of her children look at her in astonishment. They've never sat at a booth in their lives; in fact, Karen's not even sure they've ever been to a restaurant which has had one. "They're high-backed," she hisses. "We're less likely to be noticed."

Nancy, Mike and Holly glower at her, but don't argue, and they slide onto two benches at the back of the room. Mike and Nancy immediately start elbowing at each other, both wanting more space, and Karen glares at them to behave as the bored girl from behind the counter approaches.

"My name is Robin," she says in a tone which matches her expression. "I'll be your server this morning."

"We'd like to see a breakfast menu," Karen says in as dignified a manner as she is able considering the circumstances, and Robin hands each of them an eight-by-four-inch card. "And a drinks menu."

“Yeah, they’re on there,” she nods. “Let me know when you’ve made up your minds.”

“She’s made a mistake,” Mike says quietly, once she’s left them. “This isn’t a breakfast menu – there’s, like, pasta and stuff on here.”

“There’s omelettes,” Nancy points out, turning hers over. “I think this might be *the* menu.”

“Oh, dear god,” Karen murmurs, examining the double-sided card in dismay. If this is where they’re going to be forced to eat for the foreseeable future, she’s clearly going to have to get used to a far less varied diet. The prospect nauseates her slightly.

“We have to order *something*,” Mike says eventually. “It can’t be all bad.”

“Waitress,” Karen calls, ignoring her amazed expression as she approaches.

“I apologise if I forgot to introduce myself,” she says, smiling coldly. “My name is Robin.”

“Yes. Four rounds of toast, three coffees and an orange juice.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She jots this down on her notepad.

“You can’t remember that?” Karen says incredulously.

“I absolutely can, ma’am, but I can’t guarantee that the cook will, given that he has other orders to fill.” She turns on her heel and starts to walk away.

“You haven’t asked if we want anything else!” Karen snaps, prompting Robin to pause and look back at them.

“Do you?” she asks obligingly.

“Well, uh...” She stalls, trying to think of something. “Some butter and a selection of jams.”

“That is already included, ma’am, as is indicated on the menu.” She

nods at them and wanders back to the kitchen.

“The nerve of that girl,” Karen mutters, and Mike and Nancy exchange a look she can’t quite place. “If she’d served me back home, I’d have had her fired on the spot.”

They eat mostly in silence, staring into space, except for the few occasions that their attention is drawn to the chime of the bell fixed to the café door. On one such occasion, Karen lets out an involuntary gasp, recognising the police chief from earlier, now in uniform, accompanied by an unfamiliar woman head and shoulders shorter than him, with dark red hair and an easy smile.

Karen tries to cover her face with her hair, prompting a quizzical expression from Mike, who’s already finished eating. He turns around, ignoring her hissed rebuke, and this draws the attention to the police chief – Hooper, or whatever his name is. She groans inaudibly as the woman leaves the policeman at the counter and approaches, and she fixes her hair to appear slightly more sane.

“Hi,” says the woman, and Karen forces a smile. “My name’s Joyce, you must be Karen.”

“Yes, I’m Mrs Wheeler,” she says, resenting the informality. “These are my children, Nancy, Mike and Holly.”

They nod in her direction, and Mike lets out a quiet, “Chief.”

“I’m glad we caught you,” Joyce says. “Hop and I would love to invite you to dinner tonight. You know, to welcome you to town.”

“That’s incredibly kind,” Karen says, wracking her brains for a reason not to attend, but nothing comes to mind, and she swallows hard in preparation for what she’s about to say. “We’d be delighted.”

“I’m so sorry,” Nancy says with a pained smile, “but I already have plans tonight.”

“Mm, me too,” Mike adds quickly. “Your daughter invited us to a party.”

“Oh, El?” Joyce smiles. “She’s my stepdaughter, technically, but it really is only a technicality. Well, I’m glad. You’ll have to come another time.”

“Without a doubt,” Mike says with a gracious smile, and Karen resists the urge to roll her eyes. Her son has always been able to charm the whiskers off a wild tiger; it used to be endearing, but under the circumstances, it’s infuriating.

“What about me?” Holly protests.

“You can come with me,” Karen says swiftly, before her youngest daughter invites herself to whatever sordid function the other two are attending. “That is, I presume?”

“You’re most welcome,” Joyce adds kindly, addressing Holly directly, who does not seem cheered by this invitation.

“I should get going.” Hopper appears from behind and speaks quietly to Joyce, who nods briskly.

“Yes, and we should leave you to your breakfast. Is 7:30 too late for you?”

“Not at all.” *The sooner we start, the sooner we can leave*, she thinks bitterly.

“See you then,” she says, smiling brightly at them.

“Everyone here is way too nice,” Nancy mutters once they’re out of earshot, and Karen snorts.

“Everyone except the people who need to be,” she says, glaring at Robin from across the room.

She’s maintaining a brave face, but truthfully, Nancy’s sort of freaking out. And surprisingly, it’s nothing to do with the fact that she’s pretty sure she saw something small jump from her bed to Mike’s earlier today. She’d never admit this, but she’s actually kind of terrified: she’s never been in a position where, following a breakup, she hasn’t had a relationship queued up and ready. In fact, she can’t

think of a time since her freshman year of high school where she's been single for longer than a few days. It's disconcerting.

For this reason, she's quite glad to have somewhere to go tonight – somewhere to hang out with people around her own age, immerse herself in the party atmosphere, and maybe even meet someone new to rebound with.

However, when she steps out of El's little ancient car, she's accosted by a mouthful of smoke from the nearby campfire, and wonders if she's made the right choice. She's certainly overdressed: she thought the black number she chose (of the few things she's been allowed to retain) was more on the casual side, but everybody here is clad in random combinations of flannels, jeans, sweaters and body-warmers. Her heels sink a couple of inches into the muddy farm track, and Nancy sucks on the inside of her cheeks to maintain her composure.

She glances over at Mike, who's adopted his signature defensive pose – shoulders bunched up almost to his ears, hands deep in his pockets, a scowl just about visible in the semi-darkness. El wanders between the two siblings, and smiles up at them in turn.

“Okay,” Nancy says briskly, keen to take charge before anyone else can. “I’m going to, uh, do a lap, meet some people. Just so I know,” she adds conspiratorially to El, “is anyone, you know, off-limits? You keen on anyone?”

“Oh, God, no,” El says, her dark eyes widening slightly at this notion. “Town like this, you know everyone far too well to be interested in them.” Nancy decides to ignore the ominous nature of this advice and wanders off, leaving Mike and El alone. “You want to meet my friends?” El says brightly, pointing to a small huddle of three other people their age, near what seems to be an entire pig on a spit. *Sweet Jesus*, Mike thinks with a shudder.

Truth be told, he'd rather not. Having fulfilled his excuse for not attending dinner with his mother and Holly, what he really wants is to return to the motel and lie face down in a shallow bath until he permanently loses consciousness. Having spent the entire day trying to keep his family afloat, he's pretty much exhausted his reserves of begrudging positivity. Still, El looks so earnest, and Mike supposes it

couldn't hurt to forge a few alliances, if they're really in this for the long haul. After all, it's not like any of his friends from his old life have reached out to him.

"Sure," he says heavily, and El bounces over to the little group with him in tow. "This is Max, Lucas and Dustin."

"Who's this?" says one of her friends, a stocky young man with curly brown hair and a jaunty, ragged baseball cap.

"You're Mike Wheeler, aren't you?" says the other guy, holding out a hand for Mike to shake. "I'm Lucas. We heard about your, uh, situation."

"I'm Dustin."

"And I'm Max," pipes up the redheaded girl. "It's pretty rough, what happened to you."

"Thanks," Mike says lamely, feeling more than a little uncomfortable at his newfound notoriety. News travels fast in a town this small, he supposes.

"Where's Will?" Lucas asks, addressing El, and she arches an eyebrow.

"Away," she says casually. In Mike's opinion, this is nowhere near enough information, although the others seem to think so.

"Who's Will?" he asks when he can bear it no longer.

"My stepbrother," El says, with a pointed look in Max's direction. "Well, one of them. He goes away every few weeks to do the rounds of the state markets." Mike takes a few seconds to process this, and wonders why he bothered asking. He understands absolutely nothing more than he did ten seconds ago. "You hungry?"

"Uh, yeah, actually."

He hasn't noticed until just now, but he's ravenous. Since their rather disappointing breakfast, the only thing Mike's had to eat is a Twix bar he bought for a dollar from the motel's rusted vending machine

(which tasted a little stale, but he took comfort from the fact that its wrapper was sealed). A paper plate is promptly thrust into his hands, and the other four fuss around him, finding him bread and applesauce, before shunting him to the front of the line to load up his plate with meat. The attention is actually a little overwhelming, but they're clearly making an effort to be welcoming, which is rather nice. In fact, he can't remember the last time anyone was as friendly towards him as El's friends are being, least of all right after meeting him.

"What are we having?" says a voice from behind him, and he scowls. He'd forgotten Nancy was here too.

"Pork," he says through a mouthful of meat and bread. He points to the beast on the spit, and Nancy wrinkles her nose.

"Ew, Mike, how can you eat that?"

"One, I'm hungry. Two, it doesn't look like that on the plate. Three, it tastes a lot better than it looks."

"That used to be alive."

"Since when do you care about that?" Mike exclaims in disbelief. "Literally two days ago we had roast salmon for dinner! Sure, we didn't get to finish it, but that's not the point."

"That's different," she says evasively, and he dismisses her. She's being deliberately difficult, clearly because nobody's paid her the attention she was expecting. He knows this for certain, because it's a move he regularly adopts, so he knows what he's looking at.

Nancy flounces away to the makeshift bar (actually half a dozen pine planks propped up by a couple of large milk churns), if only to force her to look away from the slowly revolving pig, which is making her feel incredibly nauseated. It's not that she minds eating the thing (a fact she's sure Mike worked out), it just... seems like a bad omen, or something. She's trying not to think about it.

She's so successful in trying not to think about it that she loses

awareness of her surroundings entirely, and walks directly into someone at the bar, who swears loudly as the precarious bar counter promptly collapses at the collision.

“Are you drunk?” the person demands, and Nancy squints, trying to place her.

“Have we met?”

“Wow,” she says, deadpan. “And I thought you guys were only rude in the mornings.”

Suddenly it hits her. “You’re that waitress at the café!”

“Did you want, like, a medal?”

“I remembered you,” Nancy says crossly. This is, she feels, one of the highest courtesies of which she’s capable, but this waitress (whose name has, admittedly, escaped her) is failing to acknowledge this.

“Yeah? What’s my name?” *Damn it*, it’s like she read her mind. She folds her arms across her chest, unimpressed, and Nancy surreptitiously scans her torso for a name tag.

“I want to say Rhonda,” she says slowly, after a few moments’ serious thought.

“It’s Robin,” she says bluntly, but her irritation seems to be giving way to derisive amusement. “And maybe it’s time to switch to soda.” She wanders off, and Nancy’s far too embarrassed to admit to anyone present that there actually isn’t a drop of alcohol in her system, so she awkwardly trudges back to Mike, who, annoyingly, seems to be having rather a good time.

“Can we go?” she hisses to him, and he glowers up at her.

“This was your idea, and you want to leave early?”

“Ugh, fine, I’ll go by myself.”

“Don’t you dare,” he says sharply, standing up before she can march off. “God knows what kind of creeps will be on that road at – well,

any time of day, really. El, we'll need a lift."

"Oh, right away," she says, with a less-than-subtle smile to her friends. "Done by 8:30? Wow, you guys party *hard*." Nancy can't tell where the snort of suppressed laughter came from, but she thinks it was the redheaded girl. "Back in a minute," she adds quietly to the others, before beckoning to Nancy and Mike to follow her back to the car.

"You have a lovely home." The words are forced, but Karen silently concedes that it's not an outright lie. At least, she's pretty sure it isn't, although she has little point of comparison: she's only ever lived in two houses, but she's visited dozens in her years as a socialite, and this lounge is by far the shabbiest room she's ever been in, excluding the motel. It feels comfortable and lived-in, but the rugs are a little worn, the wallpaper's seen better days, and a thin layer of dust is visible on the mantel.

"Sorry about the mess," Joyce says, plumping up a couch pillow and gesturing to Karen to sit down. She does, and Holly slides in beside her, leaning against her and scrolling absently on her phone. "With all of us working full-time, certain chores get overlooked from time to time. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course," Karen says, even though she can't relate to this sentiment in the slightest, having always employed someone to complete such tasks. "When you say, 'all of us'..?"

"The two of us and El," she replies, sinking onto the couch at the other end. "El's the only one who still lives with us. I have two sons from my first marriage – Jonathan and Will – but they both have their own places."

"Nancy and Mike live away too," Karen says. "Usually, that is. They come home for the summer, and then... it happened. I guess it was probably for the best that they were with us."

"It really is awful," Joyce says sympathetically.

"Anyway," she says, keen to steer the conversation away from the

pity party they're heading towards, "I don't think I've asked what you do."

"Oh, I run the general store in town. It's pretty small, so a few residents prefer to go to the city to shop, but we mostly have everything people need here."

"I see," Karen says thoughtfully. "Between the motel, the police and the store, your family seems to hold most of the cards."

Joyce chuckles. "I wouldn't say that. That said, we do generally have a pretty good idea of what's going on in town, between us."

Karen doesn't immediately respond to this, too lost in her own musings to fully register what she said. From what she's seen so far, the parallels between Joyce's family and her own are... quite pronounced, in her opinion. They have three kids, two of whom have moved out; they have fingers in a lot of pies, as it were; and they seem to hold a lot of local influence, despite Joyce's modesty.

Apart from the obvious disparity in social class, the main difference between her and Joyce is that Joyce seems remarkably content with her lot. Here she is, sitting in a dusty room in the most unsightly town in America, and she's talking proudly about her children with no trace of the lofty airs her former friends maintained, asking Holly polite questions, while her husband makes dinner in the next room. It's all so foreign to Karen that she doesn't really know what to say.

Despite Joyce and Hopper's obvious best efforts, Karen can't shake this feeling of discomfort, and the evening's conversation remains slightly clipped and awkward all the way through dinner. Eventually, though, Holly's limited patience runs thin, and she starts to fuss, so Karen decides it's time to make their excuses.

"Thank you for an unforgettable evening," she says, not quite able to bring herself to use the word *pleasant*.

"We'll have to do it again sometime," Hopper says, and her heart sinks.

“Perhaps when our kids are free?” Joyce suggests, and Karen decides to play along.

“Absolutely. It’d be lovely to meet the rest of your family,” she adds, silently praying that she and the children will have left town before they set a date. Hopper follows her out, and her guard automatically goes up. “Can I help you?”

“No,” he says casually, “but I imagined you’d need my help.” Only now does she remember that they have no way of getting back to the motel, and she bites her lip to keep from groaning.

“Of course,” she says, hesitating only a moment before adding, “thank you.” He shrugs like it’s nothing, and the police truck’s central locks bleep twice.

The moment they get back, Holly retreats into the little bathroom to change into her pyjamas, before immediately crawling into their bed and pulling the covers up over her head. The glow of a phone light is clearly visible through the thin duvet, but Karen’s too physically and emotionally exhausted to reprimand her. She can hear Mike and Nancy arguing next door, their raised voices only slightly muffled by the drywall, and makes no effort to intervene. *They’re adults*, she tells herself as she changes into her nightgown and climbs into bed beside Holly. *They can work out their own issues.*

Their squabble eventually dies down, and an animalistic screech rends the air – a fox, she hopes – as tree branches scratch at the roof in the late summer wind.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” she whispers to no one in particular, and sighs as she hears Nancy telling Mike just where he can put his suitcases. *Something will come and rescue us*, she tells herself, and as she closes her eyes, she can almost believe it.

2. Two Pairs

Summary for the Chapter:

Bored and lonely, Mike and Nancy set about expanding their social circles, while Karen attempts to fast-track their eventual departure.

A cool sea breeze ruffles Mike's hair, and he smiles as the sun's summer rays beat down on him, warming his skin. Reclined on the roof, the boat bobs beneath him, and he props up one leg, folding his arms behind his head and basking in the heat. California summers are always worth coming home for, if only for this. He licks his lips and tastes salt, and lets out a sigh of contentment.

Something tickles at his leg, and he kicks impatiently, but it persists, before transitioning to fully shaking him.

"Getoffme," he mumbles sleepily, his words slurring together with tiredness.

"Mike," says an impatient voice, and he opens his eyes. He's greeted by his mother's irritable face, and a view of the motel's hideous wallpaper, peeling in several places.

"Fuck," he mutters: for the seventh consecutive night, he's failed to wake up from this miserable nightmare. "What do you want?"

"I want you to get out of bed," his mother says, "and walk Holly to school."

"What?" he says incredulously. Seriously, she woke him up for *this*? "Since when does Holly go to school?"

"Since today," she replies sharply. "I enrolled her to start there. We can't afford to pay for a tutor anymore, and it's important she doesn't fall behind on her education."

He groans and buries his face in his pillow, but she whips off the duvet, making him sit up like a shot. "*Alright*," he snaps, snatching it back and scowling at her. "But I don't see why *I* have to take her."

“Because you’ve been moping around here for a week now,” Karen says. “It’s not healthy.”

“So have you!”

“I am not *moping*,” she says loftily, “I am *planning*. There’s a difference.”

“Neither am I,” he says, seizing a shirt and some shorts and marching to the bathroom. “I’m writing.”

“Mike, you haven’t written a word since we’ve been here.”

“And you haven’t come up with a single plan, so I guess we’re even,” he says coldly, slamming the door behind him.

It’s difficult for him to believe that he’s only lived seven days of this cursed reality. Every ounce of desperate optimism he’s been clinging to for the last week has fizzled out, as has any spark of hope that it would only be a couple of days until someone stepped in to help them.

The depressing fact is that they’ve heard from no one in any meaningful way. Plenty of messages of condolence and pity – but no offers of refuge, no loans or gifts from any of their affluent friends. Not one.

As if that wasn’t enough, there’s been neither sight nor sound of his father. The few times that Mike has spared him a thought this past week, it’s only ever been sentiments of bitterness, resentment, and deep, deep fury.

“Holly!” he yells into the next room upon exiting the bathroom. When she appears, he jerks his head towards the door, gesturing that she should follow him.

“You don’t have to walk me, you know,” Holly says as he closes the door behind them.

“Mom says I do,” he replies, as if this settles it.

“I know where the school is,” she says with a shrug. “And you don’t want to come.”

“Okay, fine.” Truth be told, he’s glad to have a route out, although it does mean he just got up and dressed for no reason at all.

“Bye,” she calls, jogging a few steps ahead of him as he slows to a stop.

He folds his arms, watching her leave, and a familiar head of brown hair pops out of the reception door. “They grow up so fast,” El teases, before grinning up at him and retreating into the lobby.

“Shut up,” he mutters, but he follows her inside. “Working hard or hardly working?”

“You tell me, you’re the expert.” He snorts, but accepts the jibe with as good grace as he can muster. “I got you coffee.”

“Why?” he says dismissively, and El’s mouth twists into a curious half-smile.

“Wow, you are really not used to gestures of genuine kindness, are you?”

He doesn’t answer this, too embarrassed to admit that she’s kind of hit the nail on the head. He can’t think of a time when a friend (or even a boyfriend, come to think of it) just... bought him coffee without him asking. “It’s too sweet,” he mutters as he sips it, and El rolls her eyes.

“You’re as bad as Will.”

Mike says nothing, hoping his silence will encourage more information. Loathed as he is to admit that he’s interested by anything in this godforsaken town, El’s elusive stepbrother attracts an air of mystery by the simple fact that Mike hasn’t caught sight of him once. Neither does anyone seem to really talk about him, and every time Mike’s asked about him, the assembled company have given each other a knowing look and said something like, “You need to

meet him for yourself.” It’s beyond maddening.

Now, El simply smiles in her enigmatic way and busies herself on her vintage computer, but Mike can see a big block of green in the reflection in her glasses, which means she’s playing solitaire again. “Any news on you leaving?” she asks, and Mike snorts.

“Honestly, I’m not convinced we’re ever getting out of here. Short of winning the lottery, that is.”

She considers this. “Well, there’s always a chance.”

“I mean it,” he says heavily, “if anyone was coming to bail us out, they’d have done it already.”

“Know the feeling.”

He ignores this subtle dig; if this is a pity party, he’s going to dance. “Mom’s enrolled Holly in school,” he continues, “so clearly she thinks we’re going to be here a while.”

“You could get a job,” she suggests.

He snorts again. “Doing what?”

“Well, you mentioned you were a writer. Anything you could sell?”

Mike’s frown deepens, unnoticed by El. “Not at the moment. What’s the local school like?” he asks, keen to divert the topic of conversation elsewhere.

“Oh it’s fine,” she says. “I don’t think anyone who’s gone through it has ever gone to Harvard, but people do okay.”

He hums in acknowledgement. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You didn’t... go to college or anything?”

She smiles scornfully. “Not everyone has seventy-five thousand dollars to spare.”

"Don't be like that," he replies hotly. "Neither do I, anymore."

"Out of interest," she says, finally looking up from her computer, "how much money *did* you have?"

"Do we have to talk about that?"

"Oh, go on," she says sweetly. "I haven't brought it up all week." He says nothing, but sinks into the couch on the other side of the room and picks up one of the tattered magazines. "If I guess, will you tell me?" Again, he doesn't answer, but she takes his silence as a yes. "A million."

He sighs, and decides to humour her. "Higher."

"Five million."

"Higher."

"Ten million."

"Okay, you're going to have to start making bigger jumps," he says impatiently, and her naturally saucer-like eyes widen even further.

"Fifty million." He shakes his head. "A hundred."

"Nope."

"One hundred-fifty."

"Warmer."

"Two hundred." He arches an eyebrow. "Five hundred," she says in disbelief.

"Jesus, not that much," he says, finally, with a nervous laugh. "It wasn't all liquid, so it's hard to know an exact figure, but I think it was something like 320 million – until it all went to shit."

"320 million," she murmurs, clearly dazed. "And how much was *yours*?"

"I don't know," he says shrilly, growing rapidly tired of this

conversation. "A couple? I never really bothered to check."

A suppressed snort of amusement escapes her nose, which almost immediately shudders into gales of laughter, which Mike thinks is wholly insensitive. "I'm sorry," she says through a fit of poorly-repressed giggles. "I just can't imagine having so much money that I didn't need to look how much I had."

"Yeah, well, right now, neither can I," he says icily, turning his attention back to the magazine. He blinks at a mention of President Clinton, and turns to the front cover to check the date. "El, this magazine is from 1997."

"And you're probably the first to read it since then," she says, still laughing, and she pushes her glasses into her hair to wipe at her eyes.

When Karen and Nancy return from their breakfast at the café, a smartly-dressed man is standing at their motel door. Their family attorney was always a close personal friend to her and Ted, and it's an immense relief to see him. They're saved. Why else would he be here?

"Harold," she says, gripping his hand like a lifeline and smiling gratefully at him. "It's so good to see you. Do come in."

"It's good to see you too, Karen," he says, politely refraining from commenting on the room they've stepped into. "Even if this is just a business call."

"Nancy, fetch a chair from your room," she says quietly to her daughter. "Sit, Harold, sit."

The three of them take a seat at the frail little table, and he opens his briefcase. "Karen, I wish I could be the bearer of good news."

Karen's pleasant smile freezes on her face, desperately hoping she misheard him. "I'm sorry?"

"The fact is, we still haven't found Ted."

"What?" An edge creeps into her voice. "How can they not have

found him? This isn't the Cold War, people can't just *disappear!*"

"He's covered his tracks exceptionally well," the attorney admits. "We think he's assumed a different identity, which mean it's possible he had outside help."

"Outside help? What does that mean?" Nancy asks slowly.

"There are... enterprises," he explains, "who help people in financial difficulty to, well, vanish. Cut contacts. Start over in a new country. We think that's where some of your money went, but he must have paid cash, because there's no trace of a transfer to such a company. Here, take a look."

"What's this?" Karen blankly scans the numerous sheets of paper he's handed her, before passing them over to Nancy for further scrutiny.

Harold makes his best effort to keep his explanation simple, but unfortunately, the situation is complicated. Wheeler Enterprises has, as it turns out, been going under for some time. The financial reports he's brought, going back twelve months, clearly show that the Wheelers' fortune has been slipping away from them for a year, following an extremely poorly-judged investment in a new marketing company which folded before it even launched. Ted Wheeler made a few attempts to use his family's rapidly-shrinking fortune to generate new sources of revenue, but each one failed exponentially, as the business tycoons gradually caught wind of his failure.

"The rest, as they say," Harold says finally, "is history. Ted realised he was in too deep, and, well..."

He tails off, and Karen buries her head in her hands in despair. "So that's it?" she says hopelessly. "We have nothing?"

"Well, as the owners of Hawkins," he says, "the arrangement entailing free residency here can continue indefinitely."

"Thank god," she replies, her voice heavy with sarcasm.

"I'm truly sorry," he says gently, closing his briefcase and standing up. "You have my number, if something comes up." Nancy rises to see him out, but Karen remains at the table, paralysed by disbelief.

To say that she was getting used to this place would be a bridge too far, but the only reason she could stomach it at all was the notion that it was temporary. In her mind, this was supposed to be a brief ‘rest’ stop on the road of life, before someone swooped in to return them to their old life – or at least, something resembling it, even if it wasn’t as grandiose as before.

Now, though... the word *indefinitely* echoes around her mind, and she genuinely doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Neither can she decide whether or not she’s grateful Ted bought this stupid little town in the first place –

Karen straightens up as a brainwave hits her. “Nancy,” she says suddenly, standing up and reaching for her coat. “Get your coat.”

“It’s seventy-five degrees!”

“We’re going back into town. I know how we’re getting out.”

Despite Nancy’s best efforts, her mother refuses to divulge anything about... whatever it is she’s planning. It’s really annoying, actually, but she barely says a word to Nancy during the ten-minute walk into town. She only stops once, to lean into the general store and ask for directions for the newspaper offices, which does nothing to allay Nancy’s curiosity.

“Okay,” Nancy says finally, as they slow to a stop outside the building sporting a sign which reads, *Hawkins Post*, “either you tell me *right now* what we’re doing here, or I’m going back to the motel and not speaking to you for the rest of the day.”

“We’re going to sell the town,” her mother says, with a triumphant gleam in her eye which Nancy hasn’t seen all week.

“What, like, on eBay?”

“No, like you’d sell a house!” she says, giving her a funny look. “But I severely doubt this town has a realtor, so we’re placing an advertisement in the newspaper.”

Okay, so it’s not the worst plan in the world. Probably. Either way,

Nancy's certainly grateful for the office's air conditioning unit as they step inside, even though it's humming like an angry hornet, and sounds like it could implode at any moment.

"Excuse me?" her mother says loudly, addressing the empty room and frowning at the three unoccupied desks, scattered around the room, one on each of the other walls.

From behind an open door marked *Staff Only*, a young man's face appears, registering an expression of pure astonishment. "Good... good morning," he says, hastily re-entering the room and wiping his hands on his pants.

Nancy appraises him with interest: he seems to be about her age, with a mop of unstyled dusty-brown hair. He's taller than her, with the lanky air of someone who grew rapidly in adolescence, and never quite grew into his limbs. He's dressed in an old green-grey suit, but he's shed the jacket, untucked his shirt at the back and unbuttoned his collar. His face is angular to the point of gauntness, and the weariness in his brown eyes belies bright interest in the two people stood before him.

"Are you the receptionist?" Karen demands, and the young man quirks a smile.

"No, we don't have a receptionist. I'm the newspaper's photographer," he says politely. "My name's Jonathan."

Nancy sees her mother frown. "Joyce Byers' son, Jonathan?"

He nods. "And you are..?"

"I'm Karen Wheeler; this is my daughter Nancy."

"What can I do for you, Mrs Wheeler?" he asks, understanding dawning in his expression.

"I need to place an advertisement in your next issue," she says, and Jonathan pulls a ballpoint pen from the chipped *Star Wars* mug on his desk.

“By all means. What are you selling?”

“The town.”

Jonathan pauses, his pen poised millimetres from the surface of the notepad. “I’m sorry?”

“I’m selling the town,” she says impatiently. “I have the deed here, if you need me to prove that I’m the owner.”

“No, ma’am, I’m aware you are the legal owner,” he says politely, “I just don’t think the *Post* is the best place to advertise the town.”

Nancy winces; she’ll be the first to admit that she’s had her fair share of meltdowns at retail workers and the like, but these pale in comparison with her mother’s similar demonstrations. Karen Wheeler’s first name is well-earned – Nancy once witnessed her throwing a water jug over a waitress who mistakenly brought them napkins made from paper instead of cloth. She glances nervously at her mother’s expression, and her heart sinks. Jaw set; cheeks sucked in; eyes wide and fixed on Jonathan.

“Young man,” she says coldly. “I have explained the situation twice now. Pray I don’t need to explain a third time, if you still want this job by the end of the day.”

Astonishingly, Jonathan simply smiles, and it occurs to Nancy that he might as well be baiting a bear. “Ma’am, you misunderstand me. I understand your position – but no one outside of Hawkins reads this paper, so the only people who are going to see your advertisement already live here. The town’s realtor has an office next to the general store; she might be able to help you.”

“Is there someone more senior I can talk to?” Karen says, blatantly ignoring this sound advice. Clearly she’s forgotten the embarrassment which came about from asking El for her manager, so Nancy decides to step in and help her out.

“Mom,” Nancy says quietly, “this is pointless, maybe we should just go to the realtor.” She pays no heed to Nancy either, and simply repeats her previous request.

"My editor's out of town," says Jonathan, "and our reporter's with him."

"So who is the highest authority?"

"Me, I guess," Jonathan replies dismissively. "I will, of course, print your advertisement if you want, but it's thirty dollars for a half-page, and fifty dollars for a full page." The words '*which I'm pretty sure you can't afford*' hang unspoken in the air, but clearly Karen senses them.

"You are being deliberately difficult," she says angrily. "Your type's devotion to bureaucracy will be the death of us."

"I don't think anyone's died of common sense in recent years," Jonathan says, his polite façade rapidly slipping away.

"I'm going to Hopper," Karen announces. "If you won't help me, maybe he will." With this, she turns on her heel and marches out.

"Ugh, that was embarrassing," Nancy says. "But, like, we've been under a lot of stress."

"So I hear," Jonathan says. "Listen, is she really going to go to Hopper?"

"Oh, I expect so," she replies gloomily. "If in doubt, she goes to the highest authority she can find."

He hums in acknowledgement. "I'll bet you dinner tonight that he tells her exactly the same thing I did."

This turn of events throws her a little, but she smiles. "You're on. And I'll bet dessert she listens to him anyway."

"Done." He fumbles around on his desk and passes her a card. "Here. For, uh, business and other inquiries."

"Thanks," she says with a coy smile.

She's not going to overthink it. It's just dinner. Getting to know a peer – an ally, perhaps – a little better. It's not like the time a guy flew her to Seville for authentic tapas on their first date, or her sweet

sixteen, when her boyfriend at the time hired a twenty-six-piece orchestra to serenade their dinner. Nancy shakes her head minutely as she walks out of the office – low expectations, no disappointment.

And sure, she'd be willing to admit that Jonathan's cute, in a mysterious, unconventional way, but he doesn't exactly seem like the usual class of boys she's dated in the past. At least, she's pretty sure he doesn't have a private jet, although nothing would really surprise her at this point.

The clock on the lobby wall ticks aimlessly, marking the painstaking passage of time as Mike flops back in the threadbare couch with a sigh. He can't think of a moment in his life when he's ever been this bored. A week in Hawkins has forced him to question whether his old life was fulfilling, but at least he was never lacking in activities, social events, or people to meet for coffee and idle chat. He misses this aspect of his life; he used to relish having a day free of interaction with others, but after seven of them consecutively, he's craving any form of entertainment that isn't his cell phone.

"Do you have any games?" he asks, and El looks up from her computer.

"Probably, somewhere," she says doubtfully, "but we rarely have guests who want to play them, so they're not exactly in demand."

"What kind?"

She shrugs vaguely. "Scrabble, probably Monopoly, maybe some cards – I really don't know, it's been years since I've looked."

He sighs; before the incident, he had an enviable collection of board games, but they were presumably repossessed, along with everything else in his New York apartment. "I'm bored," he complains. "There is *literally* nothing to do here. What do you do for fun?"

"Cow-tipping," she says without missing a beat.

"What?"

"We go to the farms on the outskirts of town and tip the cows over."

“You’re not serious.”

“Deadly.”

“You just... push them over?” He’s, like, 99% sure she’s messing with him, but she looks so serious that he’s wavering.

“Yeah, it’s hilarious. Max holds the record – four in one night.” Mike looks blankly at her in disbelief, and she smirks. “Gotcha.”

“Get fucked.”

“You want to know why you’re bored?” El asks, and he suspects he won’t like what she’s about to say. “You haven’t made any friends.”

“I have friends,” he says automatically.

“Not here,” she replies. “Most of the stuff I do for fun, is with my friends.”

Alright, so she might have a point. Mike is willing to admit – reluctantly – that he hasn’t been as proactive as he could have been with regard to reaching out to the locals. He made a vague attempt on the first night, but in his defence, he didn’t expect to be here this long. Then, when it became more obvious they were here for the long run, he went into a sulk, angry at his friends for abandoning him in this desolate place, and he wasn’t exactly in the best headspace to be amicable towards the local community. Now, though, he’s running out of excuses, not to mention patience with spending his evenings moping around the hotel with his family.

“Could I join you guys sometime?” he asks, feigning a moody tone, so he doesn’t seem to desperate.

El eyes him over the rim of her glasses. “You really want to?” He shrugs, and she considers it. “Eh, I don’t see why not. We’re going to Dustin’s tonight, actually. We generally play some games, have some drinks, sometimes someone brings pizza. It’s pretty lowkey. I think you’d like it.”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

“Me, Max, Lucas, Dustin – Will, when he’s around – you know, the crowd you met last week.” He nods slowly, pondering. It would be, at least, a much smaller crowd than the fireside party, and a games night is much more his thing. He’s certainly not telling Nancy about it. “Listen,” El says, hopping down from her desk stool and scribbling something on a post-it note, “here’s the address. Come at 7:00, if you want. No hard feelings either way.”

“Alright,” Mike says, squinting at her messy handwriting.

“One condition,” she says, and his heart sinks. He *knew* there’d be something. “You watch the front desk for half an hour. I have to go buy a few things for the motel.”

“What?” he asks, alarmed. “I can’t do that.”

“Then you don’t get to come to games night,” El shrugs, and he looks daggers at her. “It’s easy! Answer the phone if it rings, ignore any emails, enter prospective guests in the spreadsheet on the computer. See you soon.”

“I’m not trained for this!” he shouts after her, but the door bangs, and he’s alone. Wonderful.

Mike climbs nervously up onto the stool which sits behind the high desk, and taps a pen nervously against the scuffed wooden surface. This is a lot more responsibility than he’s used to, and the fact that nobody has checked in or out since his family’s arrival is little comfort. He gets tetchy when he’s under stress, and the last thing he needs is to lose his temper at someone calling to make a reservation. Do people even make reservations here, or is it just a first-come, first-served deal? How should he know which rooms to allocate, or how many? Is El expecting him to clean stuff while she’s gone? He runs his hands through his hair, anxious and overwhelmed, and contemplates unplugging the phone so that it can’t ring.

Thirty minutes pass, and El does not return as promised. Mike curses and kicks the corner of the desk, eliciting another, worse, expletive. He’s still rubbing his foot when the door opens, and the little bell

screwed to the top chimes gently.

“Finally,” he snaps, but blinks in surprise when he looks up and sees the most peculiar person he’s met so far in this ridiculous town.

A young man regards him with an expression of mild interest, and Mike appraises him with equal bemusement. This is, obviously, not El – but the resemblance is uncanny. He’s a few inches taller than El, perhaps, but his slight build and softly angular face remind Mike considerably of her. His glasses are a slightly different style from hers, but a similar colour, and Mike feels a bizarre sense of *déjà-vu*. His chestnut-coloured hair is straight, and shorter than hers, cut unevenly and brushed loosely across his forehead, giving him a messy, windswept look that probably wasn’t intentional. His blue and yellow checked flannel sits comfortably on his shoulders, but in contrast with the townspeople’s typical appearance, it’s open, revealing a white t-shirt sporting a band insignia Mike can’t quite make out.

None of this is especially strange; what is unusual is that most of his apparel is smattered with spots of brightly-coloured paint, and there’s a wooden easel strapped to his back with a leather cord.

“I’m looking for El,” he says at last.

“I’m sorry, Vincent van Gogh,” Mike says drily, and the visitor’s eyes narrow, “but she’s not here.”

“Clearly.”

“You want a room?”

“Not even a little bit.”

“Then what are you doing at a motel?” Mike asks irritably, annoyed that this stranger is wasting his time.

“I just came to let El know I’m back.”

“Is that significant?” Mike says before he can stop himself. He’s not even sure why he’s being so hostile; but a stranger has approached him in an already-tense situation, and this is often the result.

“Hm, is it significant that I tell my sister that I’m home after being away for two weeks? Let me think,” the young man says sarcastically, and Mike suddenly understands.

“You’re Will?” In retrospect, this makes the resemblance between him and El even stranger, because they’re not even related by blood, but Mike doesn’t have time to dwell on this.

“Aren’t you clever,” Will replies drily. “Who are you, anyway, and since when do you work here?”

“I’m Mike,” he says, suddenly aware that he’s giving just a good first impression to El’s stepbrother as he did to her father. Man, this family must hate him by now. “Mike Wheeler. And I don’t work here, thank you very much, I’m just covering El until she gets back.”

A triumphant glint flashes across Will’s hazel eyes. “You’re the millionaire,” he says, sounding a little too gleeful for Mike’s liking. “I heard about you on the news.”

“Glad to know my misery is entertaining to you,” Mike snaps, all thoughts of a first impression forgotten.

“Oh, please,” Will replies, matching his tone. “You grew up with the world on your plate, and now you’ve moved out of your ivory tower and are finding out how the rest of the world lives. Orchestra, strike up the violins.”

Mike’s jaw twists into a scowl, but frustratingly, he can think of no retort. Will shakes his head, fixes Mike with a look of pure scorn and marches out of the lobby without another word.

As she marches back to the motel, Karen takes a moment to appreciate the clear blue sky, and smiles for the first time all week. The town realtor was not the most competent individual she’s ever encountered, but that visit was an improvement on the previous two – to the newspaper and the constabulary – where the incumbents were both downright unhelpful. It’s as though nobody wants to help her sell the town.

Now, though, she's in remarkably good spirits – the realtor agreed to put the town on the market effective immediately, and that she would contact Karen the moment somebody made contact to make an offer. *We'll be out of here in no time*, she thinks contentedly as she turns the key in her motel room door. Nancy and Holly are both there, both seated at the little circular table, looking unusually studious.

"What's all this?" she asks suspiciously, placing her purse on the bed and wandering across the room to look over their shoulders.

"Homework," Holly says, sounding disgruntled.

"Dad's financial reports," Nancy says absently, turning a page. "They sent over some... back issues."

"That's for magazines."

"Well, sorry I don't know the technical term! God," she snaps, rolling her eyes defensively, and Karen shrugs.

"I couldn't make head or tail of them anyway," Karen says dismissively. "How far do they go back?"

"Like, twenty-five years," Nancy says, glancing ahead a few sheets. "I'm pretty sure the town sale will be on here."

"On that subject," she says cheerfully, "the town's going on the market. The moment somebody buys it, we'll be on our way out with a tidy sum."

Nancy pauses on one particular page and grimaces. "Not *that* tidy."

"What do you mean?"

"Dad bought Hawkins for 300,000 dollars in 1994."

Karen freezes. "The whole town – 300,000 dollars?" Her daughter nods, and Karen ushers a protesting Holly off a chair so she can sit down. "Is that what we're going to get?" she asks, aghast.

"Well, it should be more than that," Nancy says, consulting a book

that's propped up on the table in front of her. "Due to, you know, inflation. If you're smart you might get a couple of million for it now."

This cheers her a little, but then she frowns. "Three weeks ago you told me that the Himalayas were a beach. How are you suddenly a financial advisor?"

"There's a public library in the town," she replies with a shrug. "I borrowed a book on economics so I could understand why we're in this shithole."

"Language," Karen says automatically.

"It's not that hard," Nancy goes on, undeterred. "Once you get past the technical terms, you know."

"Alright," she says, bemused by this unexpected turn of events, and keen to return to safer territory. "How was your first day at school?" she asks Holly, as Nancy turns her attention back to the book and the papers.

"Fine."

Karen wasn't expecting a full hour-by-hour account of the day, but nevertheless she finds herself underwhelmed by Holly's slightly blasé response. She bites her tongue, not wanting to be accused of overbearing, but she's wondered in recent years if her (and Ted's, technically) parenting style was everything they'd always thought it was.

She can't really recall a single occasion on which one of her children has come to her for advice about an issue they're facing. Before, she simply concluded that they didn't have problems, but it's struck her this past week that there's no way to deny that all of them now have problems – still, though, they just haven't seemed to want to talk about it. Even now, after a full day in a public school for the first time in her entire life, Holly has nothing to say to her about the experience. It's a concern, to say the least.

“Good,” she says delicately. “Is that all?”

“Yeah,” Holly replies dismissively. “It was school. It’s whatever.”

Karen decides not to press the issue, but runs a face-cloth under cold water and lies down on the bed with it over her eyes. Not for the first time this week, she can feel a headache coming on.

A couple of hours later, freshly showered, dressed and made-up, Nancy starts down the cracked sidewalk that connects the road to the town. Jonathan offered to pick her up, but she declined, preferring to arrive on her own terms. She will, however, take him up on his inevitable offer to drive her back; that is, if they make it back to the motel at all. Even for a first date, she’s not against accepting an offer to stay the night.

They’ve been texting intermittently over the course of the day, and they agreed to meet outside the café, which she’s really hoping means that they’re going somewhere *else*. The café’s... fine, by Hawkins’ standards, but she’s really hoping to go somewhere with a menu that wouldn’t fit on a postcard. She’s not worried, though. Jonathan seems as though he has more class than the guys she encountered at the fireside party (which, now she thinks of it, she doesn’t remember him attending).

Nancy smiles when she sees him leaning against a car outside the café – if they were staying, he’d have parked properly. Thank god. “Hey,” she calls when he’s within earshot, and he smiles appreciatively.

“Hi, how are you doing?”

“Uh, I’m good,” she says. “So, where are we going?”

“I thought we’d go into the city. There are a couple of decent restaurants, I thought we’d just use the evening to get to know each other a little bit.”

“Love that,” she replies, and she means it – not least because it’s her

first venture beyond the town's borders since their arrival.

"Okay, great!" He smiles shyly and steps around the car to open the passenger side door for her. "So, uh..." He sounds nervous, and Nancy wonders what he's working himself up to say. "What happened after you left the office this morning?"

"Oh." Nancy cringes at the memory, but laughs, matching his tone. "Yeah, my mom went to the police station and had basically the same conversation as we had with you."

He bites his lip, clearly trying not to smile. "I won't say I told you so."

"Ugh, I know." She sighs dramatically and rolls her eyes. "Super embarrassing. She just wouldn't listen."

"Did you go to the realtor, then?"

"Mom did, eventually." She pulls down the sun-visor, and adjusts her hair in its little mirror. "So the town's on the market."

"Oh, that's... great," Jonathan says with some surprise. "How much for?"

"We haven't actually set a price," she replies casually, "because we want people to name their price before they find out it's not worth much."

A heavy silence greets these words. "Not worth much," he repeats. "I see."

"Oh, don't be like that," Nancy says dismissively. "You know what I meant." She twiddles a dial on the dashboard and blinks in disbelief. "Oh my god, is that a cassette player? How old is this car?"

"You can put some music on if you like," Jonathan says, pointedly not answering her question. "Not sure what's in there, though, so the radio might be safer."

Undeterred, she presses play, and with a resounding *clunk*, a cassette whirs into life. To her surprise, several bars of heavy electric guitar

fill the cabin; this is not the kind of music she thought he would listen to. She was expecting classical music, or blues – not classic 80s rock. “What is this?”

“It’s the Clash,” he replies. “Do you know it?”

She shakes her head. “Maybe I will just put the radio on.” The cassette comes to a halt, and she adjusts the tuning until a more modern radio station plays clearly through the speaker grille, and relaxes a little in her seat.

In her opinion, the evening goes fairly well. Jonathan clearly has reasonable taste, as he takes them to a relatively upmarket sushi restaurant; although it’s nothing like what she’s used to, it’s perfectly palatable. If nothing else, it’s a relief to be eating anywhere other than the café, and she says so.

Over the course of the night, casual small talk blends into more personal conversation, and Nancy finds herself telling him in some detail about her life before Hawkins – where she lived, her friends, her brief stint in reality television. She tells him about Steve, too, and how he dumped her the second they arrived in Hawkins. She finds that Jonathan’s very easy to talk to, and it’s cathartic to talk about this all out loud. God knows she couldn’t say it to any of her family.

Jonathan’s quiet on the way home; then again, he’s been rather quiet for most of the evening. Nancy has to stifle a yawn several times on the journey back into town – she was tired anyway, but the two glasses of wine are catching up to her (god, this town’s making her soft!) and she’s struggling to keep her eyes open.

Jonathan turns into the motel parking lot, and Nancy concludes that the date must be almost over. Oh well. Another time.

“This was super fun,” she says as he walks her to the door. “I had a good time tonight.” She shifts her purse to her other shoulder, in case he decides to lean in and kiss her. One never knows.

“Sure,” he replies, which isn’t exactly the response she was hoping

for, so she throws another line in the hope he'll take the bait.

"We should, uh, do it again sometime," she says, pausing at the door. "I'll call you."

To her astonishment, he hesitates. "No, that's okay."

"Sorry, what?"

"Here's the thing," he says, looking more and more anxious by the second, "I like you, Nancy, but I don't want to do this again yet."

"I don't understand."

"You have a way of putting things," he says, "which makes me feel very unimportant. Also, based on what you've said, you've only been single for, like, a week. I just..." He exhales deeply, clearly trying to order his thoughts. "...I don't want to be your rebound. And whatever it is that we could have, I'd want it to be based on, you know, mutual respect," he adds before she can say anything. "So I think it's best we... put this on hold. For now, at least."

Possibly for the first time in her life, Nancy's speechless. "Oh. Okay."

"Good night," he says gently, with an attempt at a gracious smile.

"Night," she says, turning her key in the lock and hurrying inside, keen to put a door between her and the mortifying ordeal she just endured. She lets out soft sigh of frustration, which is almost immediately silenced by the similar expression on Mike's face.

A FEW HOURS EARLIER

Mike frowns at the address El gave him, and examines the apartment building in front of him. The red-brick exterior is wind-beaten and faded, and sickly brown ivy curves around one of the corner walls. He tries to tell himself that it's probably nicer on the inside, but then he remembers that he initially thought the same of the motel, and grimaces.

He paces back and forth for a few minutes, silently debating whether or not to bail on the evening altogether. On the one hand, it would be a breath of fresh air to have some company that isn't his mother and sisters, and to do something actually fun; on the other, he'd have to spend the evening making small talk with a group of people he doesn't really know.

Eventually, loneliness wins the internal battle, and Mike jams his thumb onto the buzzer before he can change his mind. He hears a window open somewhere above him, and he looks up; even squinting through the twilight evening, he can just make out Dustin's silhouette, recognising his head of unruly curls from the fireside party last week.

"Who is it?"

"It's Mike!"

"Cool, I'll buzz you in. Third floor!"

The lock clicks, and Mike pulls the door open and looks around for the elevator, before coming to the gloomy conclusion that there isn't one. He sighs, and starts trudging up the stairs, resigning himself to his fate.

By the time he reaches the third floor, he's hot and breathing hard; it's been a long time since he's been confronted with his woefully non-existent athleticism. He takes a moment to regain his composure, then knocks on the door. Muffled words echo from inside, and an unfortunately familiar face appears in the doorway, a couple of inches lower than his own.

"What are you doing here?" Will asks, somewhat rudely, in Mike's opinion. Mike takes him in, surprised at how different he looks with clean clothes and slightly tidier hair, and without the comically large easel strapped to his back.

"El invited me for games night," he replies airily, and Will lets out a doubtful hum of acknowledgement. "She *did*," Mike insists.

"Oh, I believe you," Will says, turning around and letting him in.

“She’s always enjoyed charity work.”

Mike refrains from acknowledging this jibe, and kicks off his shoes at the door, having glanced briefly around to ascertain the floor’s cleanliness. He’s pleasantly surprised to have been right about the building – it is, in fact, nicer inside. The décor is on the simple side, with the most notable feature being the patchwork rugs covering the laminated wood flooring. They in no way match the rest of the furniture, but the overall effect is rather pleasing.

“So, uh, is this your place?” Mike asks Will, in a vaguely desperate attempt to steer them back onto the track of civil conversation.

Before Will can reply, though, Dustin’s face appears in the open archway to the kitchen, and grins at them both. “It’s mine,” he says. “I work at the garage down the street, so it’s useful to have an apartment nearby.”

“Hi,” says a voice Mike recognises to be El’s. He turns around to see her, along with Lucas and Max, setting up Dustin’s circular dining table with cards and colourful plastic chips. “You found us okay, then.” Will mutters something indistinguishable under his breath, and El shoots him a look.

“Took me a couple tries,” Mike says, ignoring Will. “Found myself back at the fountain twice.”

“Yeah, that’s not unusual,” Lucas says, as Max nods in agreement. “I’d like to have a word with whichever town planner decided to place ‘Maple Street’ and ‘Maple Grove’ right next to each other.”

“Right?” Mike says enthusiastically, slightly taken aback; he’s spent a week with the distinct impression that the locals are completely oblivious to the absurdity of this town. It’s a relief to know that they, too, are aware of how ridiculous it is. “Anyway, I got as far as the garage before I realised I was in the wrong place, and had to come all the way back.”

“Occupational hazard,” Max says sympathetically.

“Shall we?” Dustin pipes up, placing a tray down on the table, laden

with bowls of chips and various dipping sauces.

A murmur of agreement goes up around the group, and they take their seats. Feeling suddenly self-conscious, Mike manages to weave his way around the table to sit next to El. Mostly, he wants to sit next to someone with whom he's shared more than ten minutes of conversation, but this has the unexpected advantage of placing a convenient buffer between him and Will, who's been giving him contemptuous looks out of the corner of his eye since the moment he arrived. Presumably, he hasn't forgotten their altercation from earlier, and Mike hasn't either, so he's glad of the reprieve.

Mike watches warily as Dustin shuffles and deals two cards out to each of them, and Max passes round the chips. "Reds are a dollar, greens are five, blues are ten," she explains as she counts them out and pushes a pile towards Mike.

"I, uh, don't have any money." Mike's ears flush with embarrassment as Will snorts into his sparkling cider.

"We don't play for money," El says quietly. "The chips don't really mean anything."

"But the winner at the end of the night gets a favour from one of the rest of us," Lucas explains. "To be cashed in before next week."

"I see," Mike says, only half-truthfully, but he resolves to work it out as he goes along, and the game commences.

He's not especially worried. He's spent enough long weekends in Atlantic City to know his way around a poker table, and he's got a strong intuitive streak, which although not watertight, typically gives him an edge. Mike examines the two cards he's been dealt (the nine of hearts and the ten of clubs) and compares them with the three laid out on the table (the two of hearts, the nine of diamonds and the queen of spades). Already not a bad start, but a single pair is unlikely to win him the round.

Max tosses a single red chip into the middle for the blind, and everyone follows suit, but no one raises the bet, so Dustin adds a fourth card to the middle – the ten of spades. *Interesting*, Mike thinks, forcing his expression to remain neutral.

Max folds. Lucas folds. Mike raises the bet to two dollars. El matches. Will matches. Dustin folds.

Dustin lays out the final card – the nine of spades. Mike's heart leaps triumphantly, but he remains casual as he pushes a green chip into the middle, prompting a murmur from Lucas and Max. El folds. Will matches.

"Turn," Dustin says quietly.

"Full house," Mike says, laying his cards over on the table, and Lucas whistles through his teeth.

Will's nose scrunches in annoyance as he turns over the ace and four of spades. "Flush."

"Nice hand," Max says approvingly, as Mike sweeps the small pile of chips towards him.

"Eh, it's mostly luck," he shrugs, and nods curtly over at Will, who reciprocates.

Regrettably, this modest assessment turns out to be prophetic, as Mike is forced to fold for the next four rounds. He bluffs his way to the final turn once, but Will doesn't back down either, and with just a pair of queens, Mike's cards just aren't good enough to confidently challenge him.

After about an hour, they break for pizza, and El tactfully divides her time between Mike and Will, who still aren't really speaking. By now, though, Mike's feeling confident enough to talk to the others without her support, until Dustin asks a problematic question.

"You know, Mike," he says through a mouthful of sausage and pepperoni, "I don't think you've told us what you do."

“Or, what you did,” Lucas adds hastily.

“I’m a writer,” he says, hoping pointlessly that the questioning will stop here.

“Cool!” Dustin says, his eyes lighting up. “Anything we might have heard of?”

“Probably not,” Mike replies evasively, “I’m mostly in the planning stages at the moment.”

A derisive laugh draws their attention towards Will’s chair. “So you have no published works?”

“Did I say that?” Mike asks, irritated.

“So you do? What are they about?” The urgency of Will’s interrogation is alarming, and Mike finds himself flustered.

“Okay, not exactly,” he says crossly, “but I have projects in... in the works.”

“I see,” Will says, and Mike suspects that he sees only too well. “So you have a written plan which you’re adding to, is that it?”

“Sure.”

“Must be extensive,” Will goes on, fixing Mike with a steely, almost hypnotic stare. “If it’s the only thing you’re working on, and you don’t have any other completed projects.”

“Will, let it go,” El says quietly, but Mike’s too piqued to appreciate the support.

“It’s... mostly a mental plan, actually.”

He senses immediately that this was the wrong thing to say, as Will sits up a little straighter in his chair, and his smile widens. “So you’re not a writer,” he says, and the biting simplicity of his words take Mike by surprise; he was half-expecting a soliloquy, like when a movie villain relates their entire plan to the protagonist. “That’s just called ‘having an imagination’.”

“*Will!*” El hisses, offering Mike a vaguely apologetic expression.

Ignoring the practically tangible tension in the room, Will says nothing more, but turns his attention back to his pizza, chewing contentedly on a crust as he shuffles the cards and starts dealing them out again. Mike is fairly certain he’s turned scarlet; partly with embarrassment, partly with impotent rage. How dare he? How *dare* Will sit there so smugly, and demean his life’s work? How dare Will, who seemingly gallivants around the state for weeks at a time, with no apparent responsibilities to speak of, make him feel stupid about his accomplishments?

Is it Mike’s fault that he can never settle on an idea long enough to formulate a decent narrative around it? Is it his fault that his life has always just been one long series of distractions, preventing him from buckling down and working on his latest story? Is it his fault that the one time he did see a project to completion, every publishing house in a fifteen-mile radius of Manhattan rejected it outright?

Mike flicks a green chip moodily into the centre, trying hard to focus on the game and not his most prominent suspicion, which is that the reason he’s so angry is that someone else has picked up on the fact that his life is – or, at least, was – a total fallacy. He’s not a writer. He’s only ever really made one piece of writing which he thought was good, and none of the publishers to whom he sent it agreed. He has, essentially, accomplished nothing. Ever.

It’s rather a bitter pill, and it’s one he’s having difficulty swallowing, especially when it’s been presented to him by someone he doesn’t even like.

Before too long, El, Lucas and Dustin all find themselves out of chips. “Okay, this is it,” Max says through a heavy yawn. “Last hand. All in.” She places the five centre cards immediately, and deals out two each for herself, Mike and Will. “Turn.”

Mike turns. “Two pairs,” he says, after scanning the cards for a

moment. Not great, but better than nothing.

Will turns. "Three of a kind." Mike closes his eyes and groans silently. Whatever Max plays, he's lost.

"You need a straight or better to win," Lucas says, voice soft so as not to break the palpable suspense buzzing around the table.

Max turns, and shakes her head. "I got nothing. You win," she adds, pushing the accumulated pile of chips towards Will, as he and El bump fists.

"Good game, everyone," Dustin says briskly, and clearly this is a cue to leave, because everyone rises from their chairs, and Mike hastily does likewise. "So Will gets the favour this week, and hosts next week."

"What exactly does that mean?" Mike asks, not entirely sure he wants to know the answer.

"It just means he can ask a favour of any one of us this week," El explains, "and we have to say yes. And games night will be at his place next Wednesday."

"Oh, good," Mike says drily, and Will claps him on the back, a little harder than would be considered familial.

"Stay on your toes," he advises. "There's a family of raccoons living in my attic, so I'll need help moving them at some point. Thanks for having us, Dustin." He hugs El, then disappears out of the apartment door.

"He's kidding," El says, but she doesn't sound certain enough to placate Mike's concerns.

Nancy closes the door behind her and surveys Mike's sullen expression. "Who pissed in your cereal?" she asks, tossing her clutch onto the little table and sinking onto her bed.

"Why ask if you don't care?" he says crossly, and Nancy sucks in her cheeks to prevent herself from yelling at him.

“You’re right, I don’t,” she snaps, storming into the bathroom and slamming the door shut. She hears a muffled rebuke from the direction of her mother and Holly’s room, but she doesn’t reply. Instead, she leans heavily on the sink and stares into the mirror, mentally replaying the evening’s events, Jonathan’s words ringing clearly in her ears.

You have a way of putting things which makes me feel very unimportant.

Nancy’s willing to admit that she wasn’t overly complimentary of Hawkins; she can’t really remember, but she might also have made some unflattering remarks about its residents. And sure, she probably mentioned Steve a couple of times; maybe even one time too many. But frankly, Nancy can think of worse dates which have led to something more, so maybe Jonathan’s just overly sensitive. Yes, that must be it.

An exasperated sigh escapes her, and Nancy roots around in the medicine cabinet for facial wipes to start the process of removing the day’s make-up. She can hear Mike shuffling around in the room next door; presumably he’s taking advantage of her absence to change into pyjamas. God knows she doesn’t need to see that, so once she’s done, Nancy paces the tiny bathroom for a minute or so, waiting until she’s certain that he’s got into bed.

Sure enough, he’s pulled the duvet up around his ears and is facing away from her bed, so Nancy slips out of her dress and pulls on the t-shirt she wears to bed, before crawling under the covers to finish changing.

When she leans back against her pillow, she lies still, and not for the first time, she’s struck by how impossibly, maddeningly quiet it is. Sometimes, the silence is broken by the cries of wild animals, or the weather; tonight, though, there’s just... nothing. No animals. No wind. No distant music from a farm party.

“Hey, Mike?” she says softly, and she hears him sigh.

“What?”

“I think I’m lonely.”

There’s a pause, and as his sheets rustle slightly, Nancy wonders if he’s turned to look at her, but she keeps staring at the ceiling. She braces herself for mockery, or just blatant apathy, and as such, his response takes her by surprise. “Join the club.” With this blunt response, Nancy hears her brother roll over and settle down. Presently, the silence softens with a series of gentle, rhythmic snores, but it’s a long time before she’s able to fall asleep. She has a lot to think about.

Author’s Note:

I hope you enjoyed! If so, please consider leaving a comment (it doesn't have to be long or coherent!) or hit me up on Tumblr (@tea-for-one-please) to let me know what you thought!